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ABSTRACT

One model of discourse production attempts to explicate deeper-level decisions that writers make, to explain why some writing activities may be more successful than others, and to indicate likely profitable modes of instruction. The model views discourse production as a series of three interactive decision levels in which (1) predicting/perceiving, (2) ideating/confirming; and (3) presenting/confirming strategies reduce the semantic knowledge to be presented and encode it into a surface-level linguistic representation. Each decision level produces a pretext structure (message base, text base) that is successively more textually and semantically organized than the previous one, and on which the next decision can operate. While all strategies are used and judged in terms of previously made decisions on other levels, implying a sequence of production, the process is interactive in nature and it is possible that all or various levels might be active simultaneously. (DF)

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A TENTATIVE MODEL OF DISCOURSE PRODUCTION

S.B. Kucer

> Frederiksen--text is viewed as resulting from a series of communication decisions whereby writers generate discourse from their store of message-relevant conceptual propositional knowledge (1978, p. 17C.)

Recently, there has been an increased interest by various segments of our society in how language users go about producing written discourse. Researchers in such academic areas as education, psychology and linguistics are presently attempting to generate discourse production models which capture, psychologically, the process that any particular writer is involved with when he attempts to produce a given text. On a more pragmatic level, teachers and the public are concerned with the question, "Why can't Johnny and Susie Write?" and this question, with its various answers, has generated methodologies and instructional materials, sentence-combining for one, which attempt to increase writing proficiency. There are problems, however, both with some of the models being proposed and with some of the questions being asked.

Many of the models being generated are of such detail and of such intricacy that their comprehensibility and instructional use, or their implications for instruction, are severely limited. It seems, and understandably so, that with their over-riding concern for producing models which are psychologically real, that they have attempted to describe more than may be possible, or even useful, at this point in time; producing descriptions that become hopelessly lost in layer upon layer of two-way flow charts and feedback systems. Thus, any psychological reality which the model may have is lost because the model itself is all but impossible to understand.

Secondly, in order for a model to have any real psychological significance, it should be able to explain behavior that happens outside the laboratory or off the paper. Furthermore, it should be capable of explaining, if only partially or tentatively, why some instruction is more successful than others in producing written discourse. And finally, it should be possible to analyze the discourse produced by an unproficient writer and hypothesize as to where in the model the person may be having difficulty and what strategies might help move him through the model or process more efficiently and more successfully. Up to this point, discourse production models have failed to generate this type of power and have even failed to address these issues.

The problem with the questions being asked by practioners and the public is that they all tend to focus on the surface forms of the discourse produced, rather than on the kinds of processes, decisions, and organizations with which a writer must be involved before arriving at a surface level representation. Furthermore, a focus on surface forms does nothing to explain how these forms were arrived at, why some writers are better able than

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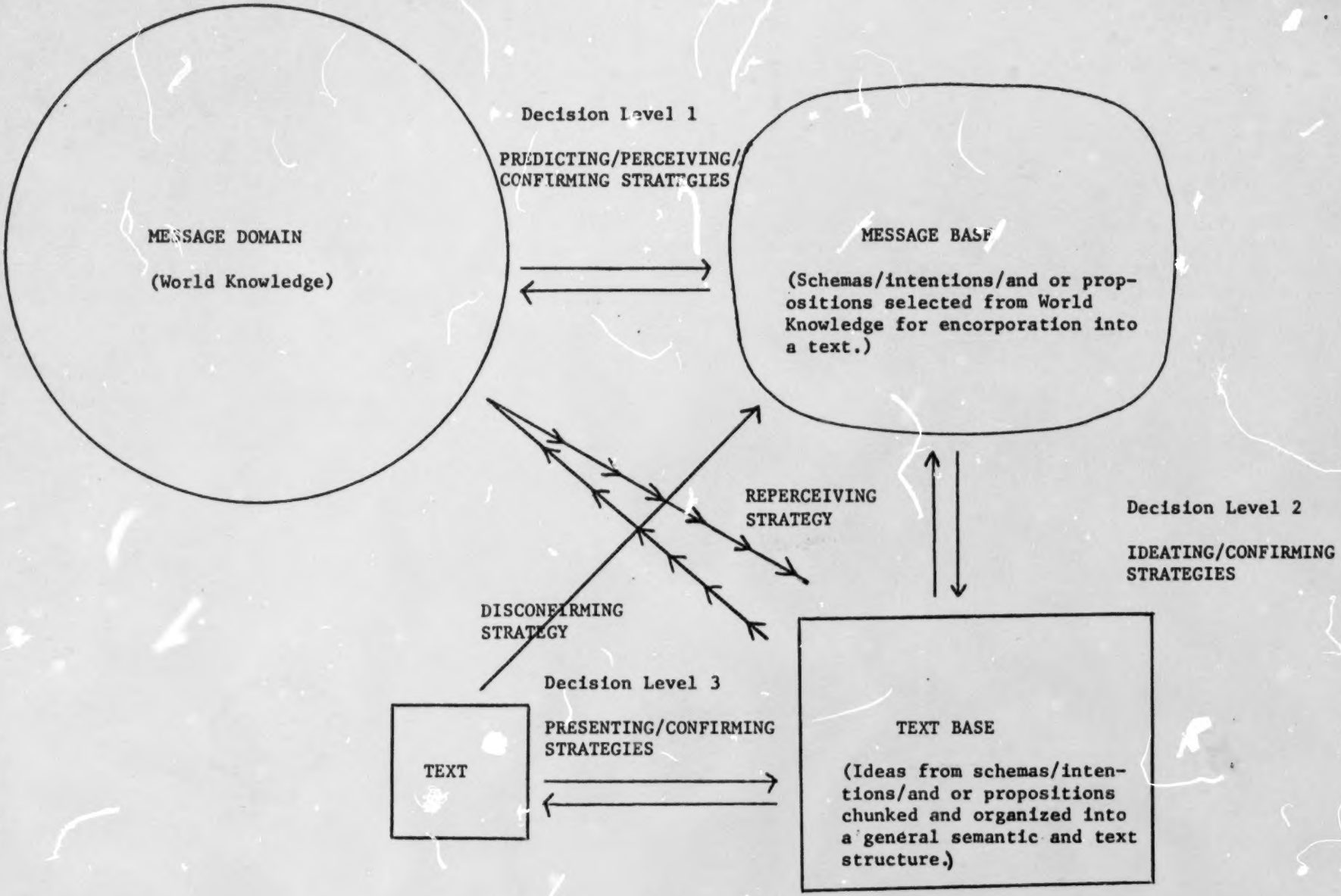
others at producing understandable surface level structures, why certain instructional techniques produce certain types of results and not others, and why they may produce certain results at one time and not at another. These also are some of the same issues which the writing models fail to address.

It seems logical that in order to begin understanding writing products that we need to examine the decisions which writers make at deeper levels than those which produce sentence level structures. This model hopes to begin to explicate some of these deeper levels. It attempts to explain in a pragmatic way why some writing activities may be more successful than others and what kinds of instruction different students might benefit from through the use of certain writing activities. The model does not, however, try to discuss in great detail every decision and procedure that a writer must go through before producing a text. Much of the process surely is idiosyncratic in nature, and even if this were not the case, attempts to capture every element involved seem to become hopelessly bogged down in trivia, at least when it comes to instructional implications. Thus, though the model surely has great gaps in it and does not capture the entire process adequately or even accurately, it hopefully does give an outline or set parameters on the process under which more detailed descriptions of various components in the process can later be subsumed.

OVERVIEW OF THE MODEL

Discourse production is a series of three interactive decision levels in which predicting/perceiving strategies, ideating/confirming strategies, and presenting/confirming strategies reduce the semantic knowledge to be presented and encodes it into a surface level linguistic representation. Each decision level produces a pretext structure (MESSAGE BASE, TEXT BASE) which is successively more organized, textually and semantically, than the previous and upon which the next decision can operate. While all strategies are used and judged in terms of previously made decisions on other levels, implying a sequence in production, the process is interactive in nature, with the possibility of all or various levels being active or activiated simultaneously (Frederiksen, 1978, Goodman, 1976, and Smith, Goodman and Meredith, 1976).



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MESSAGE DOMAIN

This domain consists of all knowledge and experiences, both cognitive and linguistic, which the language user has at his disposal. It is from this pool that information to be encorporated into a text is selected.

Decision Level 1

Through perceiving and predicting strategies, the selection of topic or content for formulation into the MESSAGE BASE occurs. This selection reflects the intentions (Schlesinger, 1971) which the language user wants to convey, and to varying degrees the depth in which the language user wants the topic explicated. Though no overt text structure organization happens at this time, semantically, the MESSAGE BASE may reflect cognitive structures or organization in the form of the schemas and/or propositions in which the knowledge has been stored. Thus, certain relations may exist in this pretext structure, some being more salient than others. This explication of the MESSAGE BASE reflects the register of the situation, such as the field (what is taking place), the mode (what part is language playing), and the tenor (who is taking part, or the audience), and all other pragmatic considerations which the writer must take into account (Halliday, 1974).

Thus, the writer cannot choose the topic and content of the text until he is capable of perceiving what the variables are which will affect these choices. Also, he needs to make predictions as to what things must be included in the text in order for it to cohere for the reader, essentially a prediction as to what the reader may be already aware of before he interacts with the discourse.

At this point, confirming strategies based on comprehension cannot fully take place. The writer must put these predictions and perceptions in "hold" until feedback is given from the TEXT BASE, the TEXT, or from the audience itself. It is at these points that the author is able to judge whether the pretext structures or the text itself adequately reflects his decisions and whether these decisions were accurate.

MESSAGE BASE

The product of Decision Level 1, it consists of the schemas/intentions and or propositions chosen for encorporation into the text. It is the topic, content in various depths, and semantic organization of information taken from the MESSAGE DOMAIN.

Decision Level 2

This is the formal organization of the selected topic and content into a general semantic and text structure, organized in a somewhat hierarchical fashion. This organization takes place through the use of ideating strategies which allows the topic and content to be organized in sequence, reference, and in the beginnings of cohesion (Halliday, 1976), thus forming the TEXT BASE.

At this time, confirming strategies are applied in order to ascertain whether the organization is reflective of the knowledge selected from the MESSAGE DOMAIN and as to whether the structure produced is reflecting the intentions of the MESSAGE BASE. As in Decision Level 1, the structure being produced is tested against the register of the situation.

If confirmation cannot take place, new ideating strategies must be applied in order to generate the TEXT BASE, or new predictions/perceptions must be made, causing a reorganization of the semantic and text structures to occur.

Thus, at this level there is the encorporation into a linguistic message a perspective on the content of the message by assigning relative prominence to units of the semantic information from the MESSAGE BASE (Frederiksen, 1978, p. 18); or the construction of a hierarchy of ideas and subideas, ala Meyers, Stein, et. al. (1975, 1978). This network is chunked and also marked for focus, emphasis, sequence, and contains both textual and propositional information.

While this organization is happening, it may be necessary for the language user to select new information for encorporation in the text that is not contained in the MESSAGE BASE. This is accomplished through reperceiving strategies that calls for returning to the MESSAGE DOMAIN directly for the needed information. This may occur when the writer makes an analogy or discovers a new insight as he formulates the TEXT BASE. Or, he may return to the MESSAGE BASE, searching for ideas to encorporate into the TEXT BASE, and when not finding them, searching the MESSAGE DOMAIN for the needed information.

TEXT BASE

This base consists of the ideas from schemas/intentions, and or propositions that are chucnked and organized into a general semantic and text structure.

Decision Level 3

The writer applies his knowledge of sentence and story structure to generate sequences of sentences from the TEXT BASE to form the TEXT. He uses presenting strategies to accomplish this. At this time he constantly compares the production to his previously made predictions, checking to see if they are reflective of these decisions and confirms then if they are.

He makes these judgements on two levels; marco and micro. The micro judgement is based on whether the sentence level structure produced is in agreement with that intended, both semantically and syntactically. It also is judged as to its agreement with the overall syntactic and semantic structure of the text. The macro judgement is made on whether the overall text being produced coheres syntactically and semantically as it relates to the BASE.

As the TEXT is being written, it may be necessary for disconfirming to take place. This is when the TEXT is not reflective of the MESSAGE BASE

and the writer returns directly to this BASE to check it against the TEXT and, if necessary, to gather more information.

Text generation is thus the application of grammatical rules which are appropriate for the writer's language community and the register in which it will be used (Frederiksen, 1978).

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